

***Leading Assessment for Learning:
Using Classroom Assessment in School Improvement***

by *Stephen Chappuis*

Do school leaders make a difference in student learning? Although the topic is of perennial interest to those in leadership positions, the attention given to leaders' competence and positive impact on student achievement seems to be somewhat more cyclical when it comes to publications on the topic. Considering the current number of Web sites, books, articles, and conferences devoted to the subject of school leadership, we appear to be in a new cycle of examination and study, looking at the topic with multiple lenses from a variety of angles. We may not yet be at the apex; Fullan (2004) predicts that leadership will be to this decade what standards-based reform was to the last.

This most recent examination provides new understandings about the nature of leadership, and is in part influenced by thinking outside of education. Previous contributions from business management (Peters and Waterman, 1982; Covey, 1989 and 1990; Senge, 1990) and from human psychology/motivation (Blanchard and Johnson, 1981) are joined by current thinking and insight (Collins, 2003; Goleman, 2003; and Gladwell, 2000). Former and current thinking share a common foundation in that they all describe principles and values by which leaders can live and work, making it more complex than simply following a checklist of behaviors or practices applied in isolation of a set of core beliefs.

What is dissimilar, however, is the state of public education itself. Today's standards-based environment is very different from when the focus was effective-schools research, and when instructional leadership and teacher supervision were the popular topics in principal training programs. Today, with school improvement taking on more urgency due to accountability legislation and the need to raise test scores, improving leadership knowledge and skill is being leveraged as one more strategy directly aimed at raising student achievement. And because not all school leaders are coming to the position as fully prepared as school systems want and need them to be, there is also a focus on the establishment of professional development programs to help existing and potential leaders better meet the fast-changing requirements of the job.

Cyclical attention notwithstanding, the positive influence that effective school leaders can have on learning continues to be supported in research. As a result, it is natural that scholars and practitioners alike would try to translate research into practice by describing what effective leadership looks like and sounds like.

Barth (1990) wrote "show me a good school and I'll show you a good principal." However, nailing down what defines "good," especially as it relates to instructional leadership, has proved to be somewhat elusive (Waters, Marzano, and McNulty, 2003).

Nevertheless, frameworks, reports, and checklists for what leaders should know and be able to do still assist in improving practice (see Sergiovanni, 2001; Hargreaves and Fink, 2004). And Waters et al. present 21 variables strongly associated with positive student outcomes, providing research-based evidence correlating specific leadership behaviors with higher student achievement. From state departments, corporate foundations, association-sponsored leadership academies, to university centers for improving leadership, there seems to be no shortage of guidance for school leaders.

The framework for leaders that follows (Chappuis, Stiggins, Arter, and Chappuis, 2004), is specific to assessment *for* learning. What distinguishes this framework from others and makes it a set of knowledge and skills that leaders should attend to it? There are two characteristics. First, standards-driven reform has created new knowledge requirements and responsibilities for school leaders. In today's systems the bell curve is being replaced by the goal of *all* students learning well. Instead of a teacher-centered curriculum, learning standards are public, and each child attaining those standards is what counts. Assessing the standards—not just through large-scale accountability tests or even local short-cycle or common assessments, but day to day in the classroom, where standards, instruction, and assessment are all pages in the same book—is a requirement for effective standards-based reform. Without specific leadership knowledge linked to intentional action to ensure assessment quality and effective use, how is it that we can expect success?

The second characteristic of this framework and why it is compelling for standards-based schools is the reward in improved student learning brought about by the use of classroom assessment *for* learning. Described by Fullan (2004) as “a high-yield strategy,” the research reported on the topic helps explain why leadership knowledge and skill (see below) specific to it would be beneficial. The gains available in student learning when classroom assessment is improved are considerable, some of the largest ever reported, and the learning effects are of “particular advantage to low attaining students” (Black and Wiliam, 1998). Because of that, assessment *for* learning has implications not just for school leaders but also for broader public policy: the research is conclusive, and improved learning lies within the grasp of anyone wishing to apply it.

Leadership Knowledge and Skill

1. The leader understands the standards of quality for student assessments and how to verify their use in their school/district assessments.
2. The leader understands the principles of assessment *for* learning and works with staff to integrate them into classroom instruction. (see Chappuis, Stiggins, Arter, and Chappuis, 2004).
3. The leader understands the necessity of clear academic achievement targets, aligned classroom-level achievement targets, and their relationship to the development of accurate assessments.
4. The leader knows and can evaluate the teacher's classroom assessment competencies and helps teachers learn to assess accurately and use the results productively.

5. The leader can plan, present, and/or secure professional development activities that contribute to the use of sound assessment practices.
6. The leader accurately analyzes student assessment information, uses the information to improve curriculum and instruction, and assists teachers in doing the same.
7. The leader can develop and implement sound assessment and assessment-related policies.
8. The leader creates the conditions necessary for the appropriate use and reporting of student achievement information, and can communicate effectively with all members of the school community about student assessment results and their relationship to improving curriculum and instruction.
9. The leader understands the attributes of a sound and balanced assessment system.
10. The leader understands the issues related to the unethical and inappropriate use of student assessment and protects students and staff from such misuse.

This set of 10 competencies is rooted in a set of strong beliefs about the role assessment can play in student motivation and learning, beliefs that ultimately act as a foundation for practice (Stiggins, 2004). As such, it isn't about the leader checking off what action was taken during the course of the day. It is more about seeing and taking advantage of the opportunities to improve student learning using classroom assessment as the catalyst. Elmore (2004) has stated that "knowing the right thing to do is the central problem of school improvement." Waters helps us organize leadership into four categories of knowledge: knowing *why* something is important, knowing *what* we need to do, knowing *how* to do it, and knowing *when* we do it. The 10 competencies can be summarized and viewed using those categories, providing additional clarity about how we might demonstrate competence.

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Knowing What to Teach and How to Assess

As school leaders, we don't all need to have "that vision thing." But all of us do need to be able to work with others to set and achieve clear goals: clear goals for the school and staff, and most importantly, clear learning targets for students. In many schools, state standards still remain unclear or require further definition, and teachers have not been given the opportunity to learn and plan together to teach, much less assess, the standards (Schmoker, 2002). And because textbooks still substitute all too often as the written

curriculum, a lack of clarity can exist in classroom curriculum. When this is the case, students can be unclear about the learning expectations held for them, and the desired congruence among the written, tested, taught, and learned curricula goes searching. Competencies 1 and 3 are based on the belief that being crystal clear about the learning targets we hold for students is the foundation of quality assessment. A fuzzy target is hard to hit: if the curriculum corner of the room is messy; by default, the assessment corner will be equally sloppy.

Ensuring that teachers get the time and support they need to work together to translate standards, benchmarks, frameworks, and grade-level curriculum into clear, teachable, and assessable learning targets is a leader's responsibility. Where more than just time is needed to make sense of the standards in terms of day-to-day instruction, leaders can turn to structured processes that help teachers further specify grade-to-grade content and commit to time-bound plans for what is to be taught when, for how long, and at what grade level. Curriculum mapping (Jacobs, 1997) and the process of vertical teaming from the College Board are strategies that provide such structure and direction, and build teacher ownership of the written curriculum in the process.

Once they are clear for the adults in the system, translating the intended learning targets into student-friendly language gives an even clearer picture of our expectations. And when targets are clear to teachers and students, teachers can then use standards of assessment quality to turn the targets into reliable assessments. But what about assessment items that teachers select instead of designing themselves? How are teachers to know if items taken from an off-the-shelf test item bank, from the back of the textbook, or pulled from one of the countless places on the Internet are accurate and of high quality and that they align with and assess the targets of instruction? We address leadership responsibilities in this framework and show staff we care about assessment quality when we structure discussions of assessment accuracy and quality, and provide the professional training teachers need to establish clear targets and apply standards of quality to all assessments.

Some state tests assess only standards that are easily measured, with important content standards eliminated from the test as a result (CISA, 2001). Narrowing the curriculum to teach only to those items covered on the test undermines a balanced curriculum, as valuable learning goes untaught simply because it is untested at the state level (Chappuis and Chappuis, 2002). The best test preparation comes with a high-quality curriculum and good teaching. If other test preparation practices are in place, Competency 10 helps leaders make sure those strategies are ethical.

How We Use Assessment as Instruction and Involve Students in the Process

Assessment begins to look like instruction when we deeply involve students in the process. The principles of assessment *for* learning (Chappuis, Stiggins, Arter, and Chappuis, 2003) that are part of Competency 2 help make testing look more like teaching. Some examples of what teachers do when applying those principles and involving students in the assessment process include:

- Keep students connected to a vision of quality as the learning unfolds, continually defining for students the learning expectations.
- Use daily strategies in the classroom that require students to think about their own progress, communicate their own understanding of what they have learned, and set goals to close the gap between where they are now relative to the intended learning and where they need to be in order to meet standards.
- Provide students descriptive feedback linked directly to the intended learning, giving them insight about current strengths and on how to do better next time, rather than evaluative feedback consisting only of marks and letter grades.
- Engage students in activities that teach the skills of self-assessment, helping them collect evidence of their own progress.
- Gather accurate information about student achievement on a regular basis in the classroom using high-quality, accurate assessments *for* learning (Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, and Chappuis, 2004).

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How We Monitor Our Practices

Schmoker (2002) refers to the “anything goes” environment of teacher supervision, citing a truce that has been called between teacher and supervisor. And Reeves (2003) points to the lack of criteria guiding administrator evaluation. Even when criteria are present, assessment knowledge and skill needed to evaluate in a meaningful way are frequently missing. This condition, coupled with the fact that assessment competence is a requirement for only a fraction of university pre-service programs, results in indicators of assessment competence not being expected or included in evaluation processes for accountability purposes. Bolton (1973) advocated that we link three key functions in a school system, calling for one office that coordinated *staff selection*, staff evaluation, and professional development. We can use the

teacher selection and interview process to help ascertain what applicants know and don’t know about quality classroom assessment. We can then design the professional development program to provide what support is needed, and finally, connect what it is that we want teachers to know and do around quality assessment directly with the teacher evaluation system. All of this begs the bigger question: should teachers be held accountable for assessment competence through the evaluation function? This may not be possible where teacher supervision and evaluation have become less reliant upon direct observation and summative processes, and are more formative and personal/professional goal-oriented in structure. Indicators of assessment competence are often absent in more traditional summative evaluation models that rely upon formal classroom observation using predetermined criteria.

If we believe that a practice is worth knowing and doing properly in the classroom, especially one that can either harm or help students, some form of monitoring will be required to ensure its implementation. Principals need to know whether or not teachers can describe:

- The purpose of each assessment given
- Who will use the results
- How the results will be reported
- When to use each assessment method (selected response, essay, performance assessment, personal observation) and how to do so correctly
- The criteria for evaluating student work, and clearly communicate this to students in ways they understand
- How, when, and why they provide descriptive feedback
- How students are actively involved in their own assessment

Seeing evidence of these and other indicators tells a principal that high-quality assessment is a priority in the classroom, and that the teacher is taking advantage of assessment *for* learning to improve student learning. And when the principal holds regular discussions with teachers about these issues and is capable of providing meaningful feedback to teachers, regardless of the evaluation model in place, conversations in the school begin to center on the importance of using assessment in ways that matter beyond final report card grades and test data analysis.

How We Communicate about Student Learning

As leaders, we are responsible for creating the conditions necessary to support accurate and meaningful communication of assessment results. That can look like working with parents to further their understanding about what state and district tests measure and don't measure, what the results show and don't show, and how students are progressing toward standards as opposed to faring against each other. One condition the school leader must tend to, if we are to provide as accurate a picture of student learning as possible, is to ensure that report card grades communicate what they should. Report card grades are a communication tool. As such, we can take steps to make sure they communicate only about student achievement, and that they reflect the current level of achievement for each student. Even better, we can transition from traditional report card grades to reporting student progress based upon the standards each student is expected to attain at a particular grade level or subject-area course.

Closing

The standardized assessments *of* learning that are part of NCLB or a district's overall assessment plan can generate information that can be used to guide programmatic

decisions and direct the school improvement process. We all need to know how to collect and make sense of the data, and then drive decisions for students based on our analysis. Short cycle or common assessments that are of high quality can help monitor more frequently student progress toward the standards. But the risk exists that we will come to believe that generating even more data and more marks for the grade book—that is, more standardized assessments *of* learning—is the same thing as classroom assessment *for* learning. It's rewarding when test scores go up; sustaining that improvement over time is what we all are now called upon to do. What if we became as focused on teaching students how to monitor, adjust, and improve their own learning using the classroom assessment process as we are about helping teachers use data to improve their own performance? The daily assessments *for* learning used by teachers that mirror good instruction and allow students to risk learning without being constantly graded, in balance with assessment *of* learning, can help schools meet the information needs of all assessment users. We can use classroom assessment for highstakes success, and watch all students celebrate the progress that they helped manage.

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